



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

XXVI.—THE FIELD OF THE ESSAY

Of all the literary terms in common use, the word "essay" has perhaps the widest field and the most indeterminate content. Since the form to which it applies has taken on a fresh character in the hands of almost all its chief exponents, it has become in practice the designation for any piece of prose of moderate length, and has consequently embraced a bewilderingly various subject-matter. Moreover, the essayists themselves are by no means all of a piece. Bacon and Lamb, for instance, have little in common; and the type of 'essayist' represented by Macaulay and Carlyle has little in common with either. As a result of this wide extension, studies of the essay either include so much as to be very indefinite,¹ or else are based on partial views, the upshot, in either case, becoming sufficiently vague. At the same time, the word "essay" goes on being used, and collections, of curiously assorted content, go on being made; and it therefore seems worth while to pass in review the different types represented in actual practice, in order to see just how much continuity is discernible among them.

I take it that the chief distinguishing marks of the essay would be held to be relative brevity and a prevailing informal tone. The first requisite is certainly fulfilled by Bacon and Addison, and in the main by Lamb and his successors; but the second is certainly not fulfilled by Bacon, nor, on the whole, by Hazlitt, especially if we compare him with Addison and Lamb. Moreover, relative

¹ So, particularly, Professor Hugh Walker's *The English Essay* (London, 1915), which, in spite of some attempt at exclusion, ends by including a little of almost everything. But I have yet to find a study which practices a vigorous delimitation.

brevity no longer necessarily applies when we turn to critical and biographical work, as is at once obvious in the case of Macaulay. We here encounter a third connotation of our elusive term, that of experimental rather than exhaustive approach—the essay as opposed to the treatise, the biographical essay, for instance, as opposed to the full-length and voluminous life. This connotation, too, is not foreign to the Baconian essay;² but if it is applied as a mediating factor between Bacon and Macaulay, the consideration of relative brevity is at once demolished. An essay of Macaulay's is more like a condensed book than an essay of Bacon's is like an essay of Macaulay's. Thus the attempt to keep these three criteria together shows us that they need not be, and in practice often are not, found in combination; so that any attempt to apply them systematically tends to split up the field into groups marked by one or two of them, but seldom by all three.

A similar cleavage is revealed if we consider the types of writing which essays represent. One type, formal argument, is obviously very rare; Bacon's *Of Usury* is unique in his collection, and the informal argument which appears in Addison is very different in procedure and in tone. Nowadays we should hardly look for explicit argument in anything properly to be called an essay, or, conversely, should think the appearance of such argument sufficient ground for denying the title. As Professor MacDonald observes,³ "Throughout the history of

² Which, as Professor Northup well says, "was to be literally an attempt, a trial (Latin *exagium*, 'a weighing, balance'), an estimate of pros and cons, a debate which should determine the practical worth of motives and qualities and characters" (Riverside edition, p. xxiii).

³ *Charles Lamb, Greatest of the Essayists*, in these *Publications*, xxxii, p. 552.

the essay contemporary events and controversial questions have been excluded." The other three major types, however, are liberally represented. Bacon describes the ideal country-house and the ideal garden; such ampler collections as the *Spectator* and the *Sketch-Book* abound in instances of description and narration, easily classifiable under their respective forms. Closely united with these is the character-sketch, as distinguished from the formal biography.⁴ As for exposition, it is obvious that probably a majority of essays fall within it, and that much of the supposed 'essay-quality' resides precisely in them. We have formal exposition in Bacon, with a conclusion emphasized and enforced; we have informal in Addison, with the conclusion not insisted on, or even left for the reader to draw; we have the use of discussion and dialog to bring out and develop differences in point of view. Whatever our angle of approach, then, we find in the essay

⁴The relation of the "character" to the essay, though undeniable, is elusive and in need of watching. The 17th century type, whether a vehicle for satire and stylistic cleverness as in Overbury, or for sounder and more sympathetic observation as in Earle, was an unstable form, which, so far as it remained a living force in literature, tended to make its subject more individual and more plausibly human, even where the generic label was retained. This development, beginning with Steele and Addison, is carried still further in Lamb's descriptions of the South Sea House clerks and the old benchers of the Temple, with an emphasis on picturesque and individual traits which reaches a climax in such pieces as Stevenson's *English Admirals* or *Portraits by Ræburn*. The result is a steady transition from the purely analytic or satiric mood to sheer delight in the quaintness of individual human beings, a change which we can also trace in the 19th century novel. That it has influenced both style and point of view in the essay proper is clear; but equally so is the fact that all such "characters" are only assimilated to the true essay, not examples of it; their proper place is under the head of descriptions of persons, with or without the addition of an analytic element.

a mixture of types and of procedures; and our problem is to decide how this mixture is to be accounted for. To solve it, we must have recourse to the historical method.

If we look back well beyond the accepted beginnings of the modern essay in Montaigne and Bacon—back, indeed, to the beginnings of modern prose literature in the humanists of Italy—we shall find the genesis of a double literary development in which lies the clue we seek. The point of departure is the Latin letter which the humanists revived after the example of the younger Seneca, and which is shown in its first stage in the works of Petrarch and Coluccio Salutati. In their hands the letter was less a means of friendly intercourse than a medium of scholarly communication; it was carefully and conscientiously written, it often passed freely from hand to hand, it might attain a very considerable length. No sharp line was drawn between the letter of this type and the treatise; the ostensible recipient was often forgotten, and the treatment became lengthy and formal. Soon, however, a wider and exacter knowledge and appreciation of ancient models began to clarify this confusion, until we have, on the one hand, real letters, following the example of Cicero, and on the other genuine treatises, frankly designed for general circulation. The process has been excellently described by Professor Rossi: "Long letters, which in their content may be compared to philosophical treatises, are frequently encountered in the correspondence of Petrarch and Coluccio, but less often in those of the humanists of the Quattrocento. For the example of Cicero, operating by a double path, favored the short and lively letter, and indicated a fitter form for the exposition of philosophical matters in the dialog. Treatises freed from that last relic of the epistolary arrangement, the superscription—the dedicatory letter might precede, independently—abound

in the humanistic literature.”⁵ This influence of the Ciceronian (and ultimately Platonic) dialog also has its share in the subsequent development. Before long all these types were taken over by vernacular writers; a capital example of the developed treatise is Leon Battista Alberti’s *Three Books on Painting*, of the dialog his discourse *On Tranquillity of Mind*. We must also, before quitting this period, mention the commentary—a conveniently inclusive term for any collection of observations which did not pretend to the formality of a treatise, and which covers, among other works, Vespasiano da Bisticci’s lives of his distinguished contemporaries and Ghiberti’s sketch of the history of the fine arts before and during his own time.⁶

After wider and exacter literary training had brought about this differentiation, a new force was added by the invention of printing. Thus, the slighter and more casual treatise assumed the form of the pamphlet, of what Professor Schelling, in speaking of the Elizabethan development, has aptly called “the prose of contemporary comment;” later the periodical essays, their brevity strictly conditioned by the circumstances of their issue, take shape in the hands of Steele and Addison; later still, the development of journalism creates the article and the editorial, thereby, we may note, furnishing a channel for the argumentative stream which has flowed away from the essay as we now understand it. But the old connection with the letter is still visible. Some of Seneca’s moral epistles would serve well enough as short editorials in a religious paper of to-day; certain letters of Petrarch and Salutati

⁵ *Il Quattrocento* (Milan, 1900), p. 84.

⁶ Alberti calls his treatise on painting a commentary, probably with a view to modesty, for it is sizable and systematic.

are easily conceived of as the ancestors of the modern review article; and conversely we still find numerous "letters to the editor" in newspaper and weekly.

Such, then, is the complex heredity which lies behind the essay in the sense of a short piece of prose. Its kinship with the letter is unmistakable, as is also its connection with the short treatise and the dialog. We may note in the *Spectator* the large part played by letters, real or imaginary; the discussions in which members of the Club, and others, participate; and the direct addresses to the public. But the kinship with the letter is the most important, and the longest to survive. In Lamb, for instance, the germs of several of the *Essays of Elia* can be found in his correspondence; and some of his letters are virtually indistinguishable from miniature essays,⁷ a statement also true of the letters of others. I can see no sense in which Gray's well-known letter on the laureateship differs in mood or style from an essay; it merely carries brevity to an extreme.

Yet another point of contact deserving mention is that between the essay and the journal or diary.⁸ We might conceive the *Spectator* as a series of detached leaves from the complete record of its author's observations and reading; and we know that various writers have actually used the journal as a repository for material later to be utilized for developed works. Joubert's *Pensées* are gleanings from the journal which he kept almost throughout his life; and the examples of Thoreau and Emerson are too

⁷ See, among others, the letter on brawn (Everyman ed., I, p. 232; that on the roast pig (*ib.*, II, p. 15); and that on life at Enfield (*ib.*, II, p. 256).

⁸ Such titles as *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, *The Rambler*, *The Citizen of the World*, are of obvious reference here.

familiar to need more than mention.⁹ The addition of a certain thread of plot gives such a record sufficient continuity to produce a type of story, in which the reflections of author and characters provide the main interests, as in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* and Holmes' *Breakfast Table* series, the plot being merely a mechanism to keep the characters moving, and provide occasions for discourse—a device for avoiding formal presentation.¹⁰

The upshot of all this is that when traits belonging to letter, informal dialog, or journal are discerned in a short piece of unclassified prose, the temptation to call it an "essay" is ready at hand; and yet what is meant is not a form, but a tone or an attitude. This tone, this attitude, may appear in such different shapes as a letter, a *Spectator* paper, or *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*; and it is therefore not surprising that the field to which the term "essay" is applied should be broad and indeterminate. Defining the essay on the basis of any collection, by one author or by several, is like trying to define a magazine on the basis of its contents; the only satisfactory account of a miscellany is just that it is a miscellany, and only a general labelling of content and intention is possible.

We thus seem brought to the conclusion that what we mean by "essay" is after all largely a matter of 'essay-quality,' and obliged to inquire whether we can give a satisfactory account of that quality. Even among the 'canonical' essayists the wide diversity of style and point

⁹ "The volume was, indeed, a kind of treatise to be:—a hard, systematic, well-concatenated train of thought, still implicated in the circumstances of a journal."—Pater, *Sebastian van Storck*.

¹⁰ Cf. Dixon Scott's remark on Henry James' *Passionate Pilgrim*: "The action of the tale—its love affair and phantom—is scarcely more than a piece of delicate clockwork to keep his impressions softly circling" (*Men of Letters*, p. 83).

of view is obvious. We can, however, limit our search by not carrying it back to Bacon; for his work, though it apparently stands at the beginning of the English essay, yet in a broader view represents the end, not the beginning, of a tradition—the tradition, that is, of humanism, clarified by experience, modified by the dawn of modern science, but unmistakable. This fact explains many traits of the *Essays*, and indeed of Bacon's general attitude.¹¹ It explains his distrust of contemporary physical science, and of the vernacular as a permanent literary medium; it explains his contempt for romantic love, and his rather slighting attitude toward poetry; it explains why one of the longest and most highly finished of the essays is that on the stock humanistic theme of friendship; it explains his fondness for the younger Seneca, always a favorite with the humanists. When he refers us to Seneca as the source of his own conception of the essay he is absolutely right, and those who wonder at his silence touching Montaigne exhibit an oddly needless perplexity.

For all practical purposes, then, the essay in its modern aspect begins with Addison, and in his work we may first examine the adjustment of author's attitude to diversified material. We find in him, as already noted, description, narration, and informal discussion; and we also find a class of essays characterized by *the inversion of a normal expository process*. That is, they expound a matter seemingly too trivial or absurd for serious exposition, or they expound it in an unexpected and whimsical way. The paper on the Fan (*Spectator*, No. 102) is a mock explan-

¹¹ For a capital account of the general background of ideas in England from which the Baconian essay emerges, see J. Zeitlin, *Commonplaces in Elizabethan Life and Letters*, in *Journ. of Eng. and Germ. Phil.* XIX (1920), pp. 47-65. The traits which he there points out can be traced well back into the Renaissance.

ation of a process, soberly setting forth the workings of the academy which offers systematic drill in the management of the "little modish machine." The paper on the Cat-call (*ibid.*, No. 361) in reply to a letter inquiring the origin of the instrument, gives the various theories on the subject offered by learned friends, and discusses its applications in the writer's own day. So the proposal (*ibid.*, No. 251) to appoint a comptroller-general of the street-cries of London, which are duly divided into vocal and instrumental, with their relative sub-groups, is perfectly regular in development. In papers such as these the essay assumes a radically new shape, and discharges a novel function.

The same inversion, under a more bewildering stylistic cloak, can be traced in much of the most characteristic work of Lamb. The *Dissertation on Roast Pig*—if classification of that delicious whimsey be needed—is a mock process; *The Two Races of Men* is a mock division; *Imperfect Sympathies* is a thesis supported by deliberately humorous examples. We have also the mock encomium—a form which can trace its ancestry well back into classical times, and which was also practised in the Renaissance—in *The Praise of Chimney-sweepers* and *A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars*. In his hands this subdivision of the essay makes steady progress in unexpectedness of topic, treatment, and style, until the second and third of these elements decisively prevail over the first. It is a method which obviously admits large amounts of paradox and parody, and may indeed employ them in excess, in which case the 'essay-quality' inevitably suffers, as it does with Mr. Chesterton. In Lamb, however, serious views usually underlie the discourse, however whimsical its outer aspect; and so they do in most of his successors who have adopted the type.

This method of inversion, it must be noted, necessarily falls in the domain of exposition, that is, on the intellectual side of writing; for the perception of unlikeness on which it rests involves comparison. An absurdity is not an absurdity to one who is unconscious of its conflict with ordinary experience; and in literature the wildest record of emotion, the most fantastic narrative, is in *method* indistinguishable from any other piece of description or narration. A fanciful story may be sober and close-knit like *Through the Looking-Glass*, or diffuse and rambling like *Water-Babies*; but only the reflective intelligence can distinguish either from a tale of common fact. So in general with inversion, paradox, irony: to the unreflective they are something quite other than what they are intended to be, and as unreflective readers abound, the puzzlement and irritation often caused by such methods are easily accounted for.

The unity of the essay, then, so far as it exists, is that of the essayist's point of view and manner of approach, not that of the several pieces, often radically different in method and temper, grouped under the term. Hence only resemblances between authors enable us to equate groups. The effort to discover a single continuous 'essay-tradition' in English is vain; I can see no reason to suppose that Lamb's work would have been in the slightest degree altered if Bacon had never written a line. Kinships between authors we can find; but they are exceedingly likely to cut across accepted literary divisions. Lamb derived much from Burton and Sir Thomas Browne; but can either be called an essayist in the sense that he is one? Dr. Holmes and Dr. Crothers have much in common; but surely the narrative interest in *The Autocrat* distinguishes it from

The Pardoner's Wallet. In other words, the principle of classification is less that of literary form than that of author's attitude and intention.

Is it, however, possible to use this last criterion as the basis of a sounder division? I believe that it is; and in conclusion I wish to point out the various main groups which have come to light in the course of our survey, and to suggest names for them, so far as reliable practice supplies them. We have three main classes, with some sub-divisions, the relations of which will be clearest if they are arranged in quasi-tabular form.

I. The non-exhaustive treatment of a historical, biographical, or critical topic, the best general term for which is *study*, as in Froude's *Short Studies in Great Subjects*, Lord Bryce's *Studies in Contemporary Biography*, or Mr. Symons' *Studies in Prose and Verse*. Sometimes, in purely critical work, the term *estimate* appears, as in Professor Mather's *Estimates in Art*, or Mr. Drinkwater's *Swinburne: An Estimate*. In biography the variations of scope and treatment may justify the use of a separate term, the best, apparently, being *portrait*, as in Mr. Gamaliel Bradford's *Confederate Portraits* and *Union Portraits*.¹²

II. The brief description of a place or a character, whether the latter be general, as in the older type, or specific. The best term for this is *sketch*, as in Irving's *Sketch-Book*, or Henry James' *Transatlantic Sketches*. The term *character*, however, will doubtless be retained in its technical sense with reference to the seventeenth-century type or to later work directly modelled on it.

¹² Mr. Bradford, as is well known, does not wholly like *portrait*, for which he would substitute *psychograph*. The latter, however, beside being ugly, seems not readily intelligible, and is hardly likely to make its way into accepted use.

III. The purely expository essay, of which we can distinguish three main types:

1) the essay which condenses the writer's experience and reading about a single topic, as in Bacon.

2) the essay which provides informal discussion of a point of manners or taste, as often in Addison and his successors.

3) the essay which inverts or whimsically applies a normal expository process, as in the examples cited from Addison and Lamb.

All three of these are sufficiently distinct to deserve separate names, especially the last; but I do not find that current practice justifies any. Certainly neither *informal* nor *familiar* can properly be restricted to either the second or the third class (neither fits the first); and there would seem to be a good opportunity for an inventor to supply us with the needed terms. Perhaps *commentary* might be revived to designate miscellaneous discussions of life in general; but it of course does not apply to any type of the essay proper.

It is now possible to see the lines by which the field of the essay is really divided. Brevity is at least highly desirable; informality has come to be largely taken for granted; tentativeness of approach and method, on the other hand, is a feature not necessarily restricted to the purely literary essay. As for the kinds of writing, the essayist's type of mind is most clearly reflected in the expository form, descriptive and narrative pieces being either subdued to it or given independent place, and argument given its own sphere in editorial or article. The literary essay as thus conceived has been well defined by Mr. D. T. Pottinger¹³ as "a written monologue or—in

¹³ *English Essays* (Macmillan, 1917), p. ix.

terms of another art—a personal letter addressed to the public.”¹⁴ It might puzzle him to explain in what sense Pater’s *Child in the House* (which he includes in his collection) is either. In truth, the portrait is obviously distinguished from the pure essay by the fact that it discards the direct approach of writer to reader, and confines itself to the presentation of its real or imaginary subject; and the style which it adopts, whether rich and full-textured as in Pater, or keenly analytical in Mr. Bradford, is necessarily far removed from that of the *causerie*.

Thus we conclude that the unifying personality of the essayist, if sufficiently strong, can bring together a great variety of themes, and that the individual essay has free scope for variation. “We have to admit,” says Mr. Ernest Rhys, “that so long as it obeys the law of being explicit, casually illuminative of its theme, and germane to the intellectual mood of its writer, then it may follow pretty much its own devices.”¹⁵ But when it becomes interested in depicting a character or narrating an event for their own sakes, it begins to pass from the circle of the essay proper to that of the sketch or the portrait; in Irving’s *Sketch-Book* no long scrutiny is needed to separate the real essays from the tales, and the task is fairly easy in many other cases. But the true province of the essay is in the setting forth—directly or invertedly—of its author’s moods, tastes, predilections, aversions, and all other reactions to experience. “We might end,” says Mr. Rhys again, “by claiming the essayists as dilute lyrists, engaged in pursuing a rhythm too subtle for verse, and life-

¹⁴ “The Essays want no Preface: they are *all Preface*: A Preface is nothing but a talk with the reader; and they do nothing else.”—Letter of Lamb to his publishers (Everyman ed., II, p. 33).

¹⁵ *A Century of Essays* (Everyman’s Library), p. viii.

like as common-room gossip.”¹⁶ In a sense it is very true that the essay in the hands of such a writer as Lamb exemplifies the finest capacities of prose as a medium of self-expression precisely as lyric poetry expresses those of verse; but thereby an *Essay of Elia* and a pure lyric are as unlike as are the two media which they thus present at their most highly finished development; they are parallel, but unmistakably different, and neither could conceivably discharge the function of the other.

I do not suppose that any examination such as the present will result in a much more careful restriction of the term “essay”; the free and easy use has gone on too long to be easily discarded. None the less, the discrimination of the true essay from the study, the portrait, and the sketch is worth making, and a perception of the real distinctions between them may in time help to make usage a little more exact.

CHARLES E. WHITMORE.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. ix.